Teaching Microaggressions, Identity, and Social Justice:

A Reflective, Experiential and Collaborative Pedagogical Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of social work is actualized through its commitment to diversity and differences in practice, as well as human rights, social, economic, and environmental justice. A review of literature on microaggressions and oppression against marginalized and vulnerable populations suggests important themes that social work instructors need to examine with students. It is unclear to what extent instructors use pedagogical tools to gain knowledge, skills, and critical consciousness to navigate social justice contents and manage difficult conversations with diverse student groups in class settings. Not much attention is paid in social work education on how well instructors are prepared to teach this content in depth and what challenges they face when facilitating highly sensitive and difficult discussions with students. This article described and evaluated five sets of reflective, experiential, and collaborative activities in a social justice course designed to help social work students examine the histories of various identity groups that have experienced discrimination and oppression and increase their self-awareness of both privilege and personal bias in one's life. These activities include: (1) reflective reading notes; (2) critical reflection paper; (3) brief lecture and experiential class activities and discussion; (4) collaborative group presentations and role-plays; and (5) cultural competency plan. Thirty-two students completed the evaluation surveys to assess their overall feedback about course activities and 36 students completed anonymous online course evaluations to assess their level of attainment in all course competencies. Student feedback collected in course evaluations and surveys, students' self-assessment of attainment of course competencies, and the instructor's critical reflection and self-assessment, suggest that teaching social justice using a reflective, experiential, and collaborative pedagogical approach has a promising potential for advancing course objectives. Through these activities, students increased their knowledge on a range of topics such as racism, oppression, microaggression, social identities, intersectionality, privilege, and cultural humility, enhanced their understanding of various forms of prejudice and discrimination, and acquired critical skills and cultural competence that have direct application in social work field.

Keywords: Social Identity, Microaggression, Pedagogy, Experiential Learning, Cultural Competency

1. Introduction

The Council of Social Work Education (CSWE)'s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2015) asserts that "Guided by a person-in-environment framework, a global perspective, respect for human diversity, and knowledge based on scientific inquiry, the purpose of social work is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons, locally and globally." (p. 5). The central idea of social work's commitment to diversity and social justice is further elaborated in Competency 2 - Engage Diversity and Differences in Practice, and in Competency 3 - Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice. Increased attention to diversity and social justice, structural inequality, and strategies to promote anti-oppressive practice, have guided both teaching and practice in social workers' response to marginalized and vulnerable populations (Miller & Garran, 2017).

Social work professionals, the clients whom they serve, and the problems with which the profession offers help, are shaped by intersectionality of multiple factors including but not limited to race, color, class, culture, sex, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, and tribal sovereign status (CSWE, 2015). Social workers need to understand how difference and diversity characterize and shape human experience and one's

social identity.   Social work education aims to help social workers understand that as "a consequence of difference, a person's life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization, alienation as well as privilege, power, and acclaim" (CSWE, 2015, p.4).   Adams, Bell, Goodman, and Joshi (2016) argue that social justice educators need a pedagogy that recognizes the opportunities and challenges students face when they acquire new ideas and understandings and engage in a learning process that is intellectually challenging and personally gratifying.   It is unclear to what extent social work instructors use pedagogical tools to gain knowledge, skills, and critical consciousness to navigate social justice contents and manage difficult conversations with diverse student groups in class settings (Garran, Kang, & Fraser, 2014).   Not much attention is paid in social work education on how well instructors are prepared to teach this content in depth and what challenges they face when facilitating highly sensitive and difficult discussions with students (Garran et al., 2014).   Based on the five key components useful in teaching from a social justice perspective (Hackman, 2005), this article described and evaluated five sets of reflective, experiential, and collaborative activities in an Identity and Social Justice course offered for students enrolled in a Master of Social Work Program.   The course is designed to help students examine identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, learn the histories of various identity groups that have experienced discrimination, microaggressions, and other forms of oppression, and increase awareness of both privilege and personal bias in one's life and practice self-reflection towards the development of cultural competence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Models for Teaching Microaggression, Diversity, and Social Justice

A review of recent literature on microaggressions and oppression targeting marginalized and vulnerable populations suggests several dominant models useful for students to learn microaggression, identity, diversity, and social justice. These models include minority stress model (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, Ouellette, Haile, & McFarlane, 2011), intersectionality theory (Ritzer, 2007), critical race pedagogy (Lynn, Jennings, & Hughes, 2013), and social identity model (Adams et al., 2016).   According to the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003), members of stigmatized minority groups face chronic stress due to discrimination and interpersonal prejudice, which can make them vulnerable for poor mental and physical health.   Minority stress theory provides critical understanding on factors that can influence the relationship between microaggressions, minority stressors, and health outcomes (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, et al., 2011).   Racial minority groups often experience high levels of stress due to experience of rejection, concealment of one's minority status, and negative perceptions and feelings about one's own minority group, which make them at risk of poor health outcomes (Meyer, 2003).

Intersectionality theory provides useful concepts for studying the relationship between intersectional microaggressions and health disparities (Ritzer, 2007). Intersectionality theory posits that our "various advantaged and disadvantaged social group memberships do not act independent of one another, or in a simply additive way" (Adams & Zuniga, 2016; p.111). These memberships interrelate to shape one's unique experiences of oppression and one's specific identity (Hankivsky, 2014).   Multiple forms of oppression often function interdependently to create a "matrix of domination" (Ritzer, 2007, p. 204) that impacts health and well-being.   Collins (2000) argues that "a system of interlocking race, class, and gender oppression" (p.222) situated in a historical context offers a more inclusive and robust framework to study both the core and the intersecting systems of oppression.

Critical race theory (CRT) offers an analytical model for learning about race, racism, and power within the system and their subsequent impacts on lives of people of color (Shimomura, 2015).   According to Kolivoski, Weaver, and Constance-Huggins (2014), CRT challenges conventional normative standards that only show the white experience and offers critical understanding into how the relationship between race, racism, and power perpetuates and maintains racial inequality.   Critical race pedagogy is a combination of CRT and critical pedagogy (Shimomura, 2015).   Solorzano and Yosso (2005) suggest five major tenets of the pedagogy: the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; the challenge to dominant ideology; the importance of experiential knowledge; the use of interdisciplinary perspectives; and the commitment to social justice.

Social identity model offers critical insights on one's development of social identity, and describes four distinct stages - (1) accepting and internalizing the dominant ideologies and values that assume the superiority of the dominant group and the inferiority of the subordinated group, (2) questioning, rejecting, or resisting the dominant ideologies and oppressive systems and the way their social group being characterized, (3) exploring, redefining, and developing a new sense of social identity that is not rooted in the norms and values of superiority and inferiority, and (4) integrating, and internalizing the new identity along with a commitment to social justice (Adams et al., 2016).

2.2 Microaggressions and Discrimination against Racially Diverse and Vulnerable Populations

Sue et al. (2007) define microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward persons of color" (p. 271). A review of recent studies on microaggressions and discrimination against racial minority and vulnerable populations reveals important themes that social justice educators need to examine more with students. Asian Americans tend to be perceived as perpetual foreigners, experience an ascription of intelligence and have their cultural values and communication styles stereotyped and pathologized by others (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). Based on survey data of 353 Asian-American college students, Choi, Lewis, Harwood, Mendenhall, and Huntt (2017) found that experience of racial microaggressions significantly predicted depressive symptoms. Employing a community-based mix method study design, Johnston-Goodstar and Roholt (2017) explored the experiences of discrimination and various forms of microaggression among Native American youths and found a significant prevalence of microaggressions for them in school settings. Native American youths experience both implicit and overt racism on a regular basis and such experience contributes to their feelings of lack of safety, discomfort, and invisibility. American Indians' experience of microaggressions was found to contribute to depression (Walls, Gonzalez, Gladney, & Onello, 2015) and suicidal ideation (O'Keefe, Wingate, Cole, Hollingsworth, & Tucker, 2015).

Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder (2008) studied racial microaggressions in the life experience of Black Americans and found that their reactions could be grouped into four major themes: healthy paranoia, sanity check, empowering and validating self, and rescuing offenders. Black Americans experience high levels of stress due to microaggression incidents and exposure to denigrating messages such as "you do not belong," "you are abnormal," "you are intellectually inferior," and "you cannot be trusted." Recent studies found that perceived major insults and everyday discrimination have deleterious effects on mental and physical health among African American populations (Lewis, Cogburn, & Williams, 2015; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Very few studies explored the occurrence and health-related consequences of microaggressions among sexual and gender minorities, particularly among those with multiple marginalized identities based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and ability (Nadal et al., 2011). Discrimination and harassment against transgender individuals are less often challenged by others; cisgender identities are often perceived as the norm and trans identities are marginalized (Nicolazzo, 2015; Seelman, 2013). Microaggressions were found to associate with greater psychological distress (e.g. anxiety and perceived stress) among LGBQ college students (Woodford, Kulick, Sinco, & Hong, 2014). Nadal, Rivera, and Corpus (2010) found four major themes in sexual orientation and gender identity microaggressions: (1) assumptions of sexual pathology, (2) discomfort/disapproval of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender experiences, (3) assumptions of universal experience, and (4) exoticization.

Nadal, Issa, Griffin, Hamit, and Lyons (2010) define religious microaggression as "subtle behavioral and verbal exchanges (both conscious and unconscious) that send denigrating messages to individuals of various religious groups" (p. 297). Muslim individuals who experience religious discrimination have reported lower self-esteem (Moradi & Hasan, 2004) and higher levels of stress (Rippy & Newman, 2006). Religious discrimination was found to associate with sleeping difficulties and headaches (Nadal et al., 2010) and symptoms of "paranoia, vigilance, mistrust, and suspicion" that may lead to functional impairment (Rippy & Newman, 2006). Nadal et al. (2012) empirically evaluated the taxonomy of religious microaggressions among a small sample of Muslim Americans and found six themes specific to them: "Endorsing religious stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists, pathologizing the Muslim religion, assuming religious homogeneity, exoticizing Muslim religion, Islamophobic and mocking language, and feelings of being an alien in one's own country" (p. 22).

2.3 Challenges in Teaching Social Justice and Initiating Racial Dialogues

Dialogues on race, racism, and power, are difficult when students and the faculty have diverse backgrounds and share different racial perspectives; when heated emotional exchanges occur; and when there is a strong fear of self-disclosure (Sue et al., 2011). Goodman (2011) posits that a major challenge for educators teaching about microaggression, identity, and social justice is in managing classroom dynamics and discussion. When social justice educators and students engage in heated and intense discussions about race or racism, they often experience high levels of tension due to student resistance and reactions. Garran et al. (2014) summarized some of these reactions: (1) white students remain silent because of feeling guilt and shame; (2) students of color feel frustrated or angry; and (3) the instructors feel anxious when they try to monitor the dynamics and manage intense levels of emotional reactions in the classroom. Faculty and students feel uncomfortable engaging in discussion about race and racism because such dialogues may reveal personal beliefs or feelings related to racial prejudice or bias.

According to Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, and Rivera (2009), difficult dialogues on race or racism may trigger potentially difficult interactions and discussion among students of different racial or ethnic groups when they (a) share an unequal status of power and privilege, (b) show major differences in their perspectives, personalities, and worldviews, (c) appear to be offensive to others, (d) reveal biases and prejudices, and (e) trigger intense emotional reactions.   The emotionally charged dialogues may result in misunderstandings, tensions, and hostility between the groups (Watt, 2007; Sue & Constantine, 2007; Young, 2003).   The denial and minimization of racial topics is perceived as a denial of their racial realities and evokes powerful emotions of anger, fear and frustration (Sue, et al., 2009).   A major challenge for the educators is to critically reflect their own beliefs and bias and try to be objective in racial dialogues. Difficult dialogues handled poorly may result in negative consequences such as anger, hostility, complaints, misunderstandings, and hindrance of the learning process (Sanchez-Hucles, & Jones, 2005; Young, 2003).   If skillfully handled, they present an opportunity to students for personal reflection, improved trust and candid communication, and deep learning.

3. Methods

3.1 Description of Course Objectives and Competencies

The *Identity and Social Justice* course is designed to help students examine identities such as race and ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, disability, immigration status, and religious affiliation and learn the histories of various identity groups that have experienced discrimination and oppression, and the ways they have responded.   The course seeks to nurture both cultural competence and the recognition that, despite having some knowledge of different cultures, students cannot become true experts in the cultures of all their clients.   The task is to develop enough cultural competence to function effectively and remain open to understanding various cultural patterns and concerns in their work with individuals and communities that differ from their own. The course guides and supports students through a self-directed process in which students examine their own social identity development in cultural contexts so that they can bring appropriate self-awareness and self-understanding to social work practice. Students completing the course are expected to achieve several competencies:

1. Learn the concepts of race, racism, oppression, microaggression, power, privilege, intersectionality, and cultural humility, and understand the implications of racism and other forms of bigotry for the physical and mental health well-being of individuals and communities.
2. Understand institutional/systemic discrimination as a concept and its mechanisms in practice and identify various forms of prejudice and discrimination and examine their manifestations at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.
3. Articulate an ethical framework rooted in social justice for advocating on behalf of populations subjected to prejudice and discrimination.
4. Increase awareness of both privilege and personal bias in one's life and utilize self-reflection towards the development of cultural competence.
5. Recognize the cultural complexity of various immigrant groups and communicate affirmation and respect for the diversity and strengths across and within various cultures/cultural groups.

3.2 Overview of Reflective, Experiential, & Collaborative Learning Activities

Pedagogical choices that social work educators make are important as they guide what content they teach, what students are learning, and how they are learning.   The design of reflective, experiential, and collaborative learning activities for this course incorporates five key components described by Hackman (2005) in teaching from a social justice perspective: tools for content mastery, tools for critical thinking, tools for action and social change, tools for personal reflection, and tools for awareness of multicultural group dynamics.

3.2.1 Reflective Reading Notes

Mastery of social justice contents involves critical analysis of "factual information, historical contextualization, and a macro-to-micro content analysis" (Hackman, 2005, p. 104).   Students are asked to write reflective reading notes to share their thoughts and critical analysis on the readings for the week.   Students structure their notes around their personal and professional reflections on the course material.   They consider the ways that the readings resonate with their experience and the ways that the readings challenge them to think beyond their experience.   They are encouraged to write reading notes on the week's readings they find most challenging in the light of their own life experiences. By completing the notes, students recognize the needs to examine the social justice content with a critical perspective because historical and factual information are often written by members of dominant groups.   A broader representation of history other than those presented in educational materials or mainstream media is essential (Hackman, 2005).

3.2.2 Critical Reflection Paper

Students learn to be aware of their history, values, biases, and prejudices.   What they believe as 'truths' has been shaped by what they were taught through involvement in family, religion, schools, media, and other systems. Experiences through interaction with all these systems have influenced on how they think, act, feel, and interact with others who may think, act, or feel differently.   The critical reflection paper is designed to encourage students to analyze and reflect on their own social identities, values, and beliefs and to begin to think about how they impact their ability to function effectively in a diverse environment. The paper consists of three sections:

Background - students describe the development of their identity as well as their beliefs and attitudes towards difference such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, and abilities.   They describe how their identities and beliefs are shaped by factors such as ethnic or racial heritage, gender and sexual orientation, socioeconomic group, country/ region, religious beliefs or affiliation, and socio-political influences.

Current Assessment - students describe their current identity as well as beliefs and attitudes towards difference such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, and abilities.   They are asked to critically reflect what they have chosen to retain certain identities, values, and beliefs developed in childhood years or they modified or replaced them.   They identify and discuss biases they now have regarding groups different from themselves and explore if those biases influence the ways in which they interact with persons of those groups.

Final Assessment - students share how their life experiences affect their work.   Their experiences and attitudes can be powerful tools to enhance their professional competence or can be stumbling blocks in their work with diverse populations.   Students are asked to assess their cultural understanding and examine if their unique experience, knowledge, and attitudes make them more sensitive, concerned, or engaged. Four major competencies are identified – self-disclosure, connection to outside experiences, connection to readings, and connection to class discussions and course objectives   Table 1 illustrates the use of grading rubric to assess students' attainment of these competencies.

Table 1. Grading Rubric for Completing Critical Reflection Paper

Categories	Exemplary	Intermediate	Beginning
Self-disclosure	Seeks to understand concepts by examining openly your own experiences in the past as they relate to the topic, to illustrate points you are making. Demonstrates an open, non-defensive ability to self-appraise, discussing both growth and frustrations as they related to learning in class. Risks asking probing questions about self and seeks to answer these.	Seeks to understand concepts by examining somewhat cautiously your own experiences in the past as they relate to the topic. Sometimes defensive or one-sided in your analysis. Asks some probing questions about self, but do not engage in seeking to answer these.	Little self-disclosure, minimal risk in connecting concepts from class to personal experiences. Self-disclosure tends to be superficial and factual, without self-reflection.
Connection to outside experiences	In-depth synthesis of thoughtfully selected aspects of experiences related to the topic. Makes clear connections between what is learned from outside experiences and the topic.	Goes into some detail explaining some specific ideas or issues from outside experiences related to the topic. Makes general connections between what is learned from outside experiences and the topic.	Identify some general ideas or issues from outside experiences related to the topic
Connection to readings	In-depth synthesis of thoughtfully selected aspects of readings related to the topic. Makes clear connections between what is learned from readings and the topic. Demonstrate further analysis and insight resulting from what you have learned from reading. Includes reference to at least two readings other than those assigned for class.	Goes into more detail explaining some specific ideas or issues from readings related to the topic. Makes general connections between what is learned from readings and the topic. Includes reference to at least one reading other than those assigned for class.	Identify some general ideas or issues from readings related to the topic. Readings are only those assigned for the topic.
Connection to class discussions & course objectives	Synthesize, analyze and evaluate thoughtfully selected aspects of ideas or issues from the class discussion as they relate to this topic.	Synthesize clearly some directly appropriate ideas or issues from the class discussion as they relate to this topic.	Restate some general ideas or issues from the class discussion as they relate to this topic.

3.2.3 Brief Lecture and Experiential Class Activities and Discussion

An important goal of teaching social justice is that students understand the interrelationships between individual bias, prejudice, or misinformation; marginalization and systemic discrimination; and cultural and social structures that benefits some groups while disadvantaging others (Bell, Goodman, & Varghese, 2016).   To provide a conceptual framework of learning social injustice and acquiring a deep level understanding of cultural, structural, and institutional forms of oppression, the instructor introduces several models of microaggression, diversity, and social justice including minority stress model (Meyer, 2003; Meyer et al., 2011), intersectionality theory (Ritzer, 2007), critical race pedagogy (Lynn et al., 2013), and social identity model (Adams et al., 2016).   Students then learn the concepts of race, racism, oppression, microaggression, prejudice, privilege, intersectionality, and cultural humility. The instructor uses brief presentations, videos, documentaries, and class activities and discussion to help students learn about racism, classism, and other forms of oppressions.   The instructor does not simply convey content but engages students in learning the concepts of social identities, power, privilege, and structural inequalities in our society as well as in their own lives.   Analyzing these concepts can be cognitively challenging and emotionally taxing for students (Adams, et al., 2016).   Learning these materials can also be transformative as students develop greater personal awareness, expand knowledge that dispels dominant perspectives, increase commitment in social action, and make changes in themselves and their environments.

Through class activities and discussion, students coming from privileged and dominant groups are encouraged to reflect their privilege in the society and recognize that they are often socialized not to see their privilege; not to see their life and its privileges as the "norms" for society; and that they have done nothing to earn this privilege

(Hackman, 2005).   Students from subordinate groups can reflect and share how internalized oppression has impacted their lives and communities. Social justice education helps students use critical analysis of issues of oppression to provide both deep knowledge and a direction for the application of that knowledge in their lives (Hackman, 2005). Through brief lectures and class discussion, students learn how to use information to critique systems of power and inequality in society, understand who benefits from said systems, and consider what aspects of social structures keep those inequalities alive.

Several elements of critical thinking reflected in these collaborative learning activities include: (1) focusing on information from multiple non-dominant perspectives and perceiving those perspectives as equally valid to the dominant one; (2) remaining open minded to a broader range of experiences; (3) analyzing the effects of power and oppression; (4) inquiring into what alternatives exist with respect to the current, dominant view of reality of a particular issue (Hackman, 2005, p.106).   Students are often personally situated within matrices of oppression that influence their connections to, and experiences with, the topic under discussion (Ritzer, 2007). Instead of adopting a didactic model of teaching, the instructor facilitates an interactive and collaborative process that enhances student engagement, participation, and critical analysis of the subject matter that represents a novel pedagogical approach than the traditional one of content mastery and expertise (Hackman, 2005).   It is important for the instructor to understand group dynamics of the classroom and the socially constructed identities of both the students and the instructor.   The form and type of content that the instructor presents, the attention to how different class compositions affect dialogue and discussion, and the amount of time spent on the content versus process will differ from one class to another.

3.2.4 Collaborative Group Presentations and Roles Plays

The focus of small group presentations, role plays, and facilitated class discussion is for students to examine more in-depth their own social identities and statuses and analyze how these connect with larger systems of oppression. They explore how institutional and cultural dynamics impact them as members of particular social groups.   They learn how their cultural backgrounds and social identities influence their world views and lived realities.   By sharing their own stories and hearing those of others, students reflect on their own experiences and recognize commonalities and differences with others who have similar and different social identities. Students need to learn how to critically analyze the interactions among their multiple identities and positions of advantage and disadvantage. One way to facilitate this exploration is to have students form small groups that focus on a single identity such as race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, or ability. Exploration of social identities and statuses place students within the system of dominant ideologies that categorizes and ranks people based on their social group memberships (Adams, et cl., 2016).

Students are asked to form a small group of 3 to 4 members and work collaboratively on one of social identity groups such as people of African-descent, Latinos, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Jewish Americans, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) persons.   They are asked to give a presentation of key characteristics (e.g. history, culture, strengths, stereotypes, etc.) of the selected group, demonstrate skills required for cultural competence in working with the group, and facilitate a discussion of the selected cases presented in the role-plays. The presentation needs to shed light on issues such as discrimination, stereotypes, biases, challenges, or microaggressions that affect this identity group.   Students design several role-plays to illustrate cultural stereotypes and the process of stigmatization that create and reinforce client's oppressive realities. They perform role-plays demonstrating issues/concerns of cultural awareness and competence in an imaginary or real (but de-identified) case situations.   Following the presentation and role-plays, the class will have the opportunity to reflect and discuss these critical issues more thoroughly.   Students prepare a list of key questions for class discussion with specifics about the role-play including details regarding the issues demonstrated and their impact on the client experience.

Students are encouraged to engage actively in their learning and with each other to explore the challenging ideas and emotions that inevitably emerge in the process of learning about oppression, discrimination, and social injustice. Such pedagogy recognizes the challenges and opportunities students face when they confront new ideas and perspectives and engage in a learning process that can be personally satisfying and intellectually challenging. According to Adams et al. (2016), social justice education needs a pedagogy that acknowledges both emotional and cognitive aspects of learning, models process for dialogue, critical inquiry, and complex thinking, and embodies an analysis of oppression that is both inside and outside the classroom.   To achieve these purposes, it is important to create learning communities where members share and learn from each other's experiences, reflect on their own and other's experiences to make sense of larger structural systems of advantage and disadvantage, and create new meanings for themselves.   Such pedagogy involves "the constellation of subjective knowledge, challenging

information, charged emotions, multiple perspectives, differing social identities, and the coordination of concrete experiences and abstract frameworks" (p.29). It is a pedagogy that is experiential, student-centered, inclusive, and collaborative.

3.2.5 Cultural Competency Plan

Cultural competence training needs to encompass: (a) understanding of one's self as a racial/cultural being and of the biases, stereotypes, and assumptions that influence worldviews, (b) awareness of the worldviews of culturally diverse clients, and (c) becoming comfortable in discussing issues of race and racism in an open, honest and sensitive manner (Sue & Constantine, 2007; American Psychological Association, 2003; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). The cultural competency plan is designed to help students learn the importance of their lived experiences in relating to others who differ from them in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture, and acknowledge and confront any hidden racial biases and prejudices (Sue & Sue, 2008). Students are asked to examine the types of clientele they may find particularly challenging or comfortable to work with due to their own background, values, and relationship style. The plan includes the following elements:

Self-Assessment of Beginning Cultural Competence – Students describe the level of cultural competence they have when they start the course and share what experience they have particularly shaped their views of their own culture and the culture of others.

What They Learn in the Course – Students highlight succinctly the things they learn while participating in this course that are most meaningful for them. What challenges their preconceptions? What piques their curiosity and make them want to learn more? What questions they raise that merit further investigation and exploration?

Types of Clients They Can Help – Students discuss what they learn about cultures and families that may relate to any previous and current experiences. What groups and cultures do they want to learn more so that they can provide social work services effectively? They are asked to describe any population that may be difficult for them to work with and discuss the reason they believe so. They reflect whether there is something that they feel they should overcome, and whether they should do something to make it easier for them to work with this population.

What More They Need to Know – Students describe what else they want to learn more about other cultures and diverse families and discuss some of the ways they can acquire more knowledge.

Action Steps – Students are asked to list three to five actions that are reasonable and feasible for them to do to increase cultural competence.

4. Results

4.1 Summary of Students' Self-Assessment of Attainment of Course Competencies

Students completed anonymous online course evaluations to assess their level of attainment in all course competencies specified in the syllabus. Of 38 students enrolled in 2 sections of Identity and Social Justice course in fall 2017 and Spring 2018, 36 completed the evaluation. The results showed that majority of students either strongly agreed or agreed that they attained all course competencies (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Self-Assessment of Attainment of Course Competencies (N=36)

Attainment of Course Competencies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Analyze the differential impact of the social environment as it impacts various oppressed groups	75% (27)	22% (8)	3% (1)		
Understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination	75% (27)	25% (9)			
Utilize self-reflection towards the development of cultural competence	78% (28)	22% (8)			
Identify privilege in one's own life in the domains in which it exists	75% (27)	19% (7)	6% (2)		
Recognize the value of using an anti-racist and affirming framework with oppressed populations	81% (29)	19% (7)			
Demonstrate an understanding of the implications that race and racism has on the well-being of individuals and families	86% (31)	14% (5)			
Recognize the cultural complexity of various immigrant groups	83% (30)	17% (6)			
Attain an ethical and social justice framework for advocating on behalf of oppressed populations	72% (26)	28% (10)			
Appreciate the need for career-long learning regarding the strengths and vulnerabilities of oppressed populations	75% (27)	25% (9)			
Develop a personal work plan for culturally sensitive practice	75% (27)	22% (8)	3% (1)		
Communicate affirmation and respect for the diversity and strengths across and within various cultures/cultural groups as detailed in the NASW Code of Ethics	78% (28)	22% (8)			

4.2 Summary of Evaluation Surveys

To assess the design and delivery of course activities and assignments, the instructor administered an evaluation survey with the students to obtain their feedback about the course activities and assignments and to determine if these activities/assignments helped advance their understanding of course materials and gain course competencies. Results from 32 completed surveys showed that students had overwhelmingly positive experiences with all the course activities.   Students' assessment of each major learning activity or assignment was summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Assessment of Major Learning Activities and Assignments (N=32)

Major Learning Activities and Assignments	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Reflective Reading Notes	22(69%)	10(31%)			
Instructor's Lecture and PowerPoint Presentation	28(87%)	4(13%)			
Multimedia – Video Clips, Websites, and Other Reports	27(84%)	5(16%)			
Experiential Class Activities and Discussion	25(78%)	7(22%)			
Critical Reflection Paper	25(78%)	7(22%)			
Collaborative Group Presentation and Role-Plays	25(78%)	7(22%)			
Cultural Competency Plan	26(81%)	4(13%)	1(3%)		1(3%)

Almost all students (31) rated their amount of interaction with other students as either excellent (72%) or very good (25%). They rated their amount of interaction with the instructor as excellent (29 students, 91%) or very good (3 students, 9%). Twenty-three students (72%) described the quality of interaction with other students as excellent and 7(22%) described the interaction as very good. Twenty-seven students (84%) described the quality of interaction with the instructor excellent. Three students (9%) rated their quality of interaction with the instructor as very good (9%). Overall, they all felt either strongly satisfied (78%) or satisfied (22%) with the course.

4.3 Student's Qualitative Feedback on the Instructor's Course Evaluations

The instructor of a social justice course must be knowledgeable and passionate about the course material and able to work effectively with students on a range of activities that are reflective, experiential, student-centered, and collaborative. The instructor's enthusiasm for social justice contents and belief in the capacity of students can make a significant impact on the student learning. This instructor shows his enthusiasm by sharing his own experiences working with ethnically diverse populations including professional practice examples of enhancing culturally competent practice. Their positive comments on this instructor's course evaluations reflected the importance of the instructor's attitude and experience in teaching social justice.

"Professor's genuine nature and broad experience make students feel at ease when undergoing deep, often unsettling inner work of self-analysis and cultural competency."

"The course taught me to challenge my beliefs about people who I previously had a mindset fixed. This course could easily have been a place for strong racial discrimination, but professor clearly designed it so it was a positive learning experience, yet there was an openness about our past beliefs."

"I enjoyed the intense debates between students in class. Great passion was expressed by the students about various populations in society who are discriminated against."

It is important to create a collaborative learning environment with an emphasis on positive relationships between the instructor and students wherein students can ask questions and express their views comfortably, be guided to apply critical thinking skills towards social justice content, and be supported cognitively and emotionally in their learning activities. The instructor needs to be personable, accessible, helpful, and brings an element of mutual respect and humanity to the classroom. The following students' comments on this instructor's course evaluations reflected the importance of creating a collaborative and supportive learning environment:

"When you ask a question, he answers it with an explanation, and examples. When it comes to class discussions, he is very respectful of students' feelings and opinions. He encourages students to respect other point of view even if you disagreed."

"He demonstrated a very high level of respect for his students and demonstrated a high level of cultural competence. This level of teaching is so important especially in a master's program."

The use of incremental yet structured learning opportunities is also very helpful to provide a supportive learning environment (Kwong, 2017). This instructor breaks up major concepts and learning tasks into manageable assignments, allowing each assignment to be graded at regular intervals. The instructor uses a detailed grading rubric to provide specific feedback to students on each assignment. The students then incorporate the instructor's feedback to further their self-reflection and critical analyses of complex social justice contents. In this course, students are provided with lots of course materials which include lecture notes and slides, helpful video links, and

assignment descriptions with grading rubrics. Students appreciate such structured and gradual learning opportunities, as reflected in this instructor's course evaluations:

"Always asked for feedback or any questions/concerns on any course materials. Always update on course materials and presentations. Break down relevant reading materials so that students have a better understanding. Give examples to clarify reading or assignments."

"I love how engaging and exciting the material was for the course I felt as if he was very fair with his workload."

"I like his ability in how to elaborate in detail the many perspectives we discussed in class. He was so clear in explaining the objectives and extremely engaging with the students."

4.4 Instructor's Critical Reflection and Self-Assessment

As an instructor, I need to be aware where I am situated in the classroom and broader community, using the lens of social identities, dominant and subordinated statuses, and related socialization (Bell et al., 2016). When engaging class discussion on issues of oppression and privilege, I observe that persons from dominant groups may feel entangled in the reality of their privilege while individuals from marginalized minority groups may re-experience fear, frustration, and anger of oppression. The constellation of subordinated and privileged positions I hold in the society affects how I perceive and respond to students, and the content and the pedagogies with which I am most comfortable using. In teaching social justice content, I realize there are topics I have studied thoroughly while there are other topics I know minimally. I have more knowledge on experiences of individuals from certain identity groups but have limited exposure to the lived experience of other identity groups. I work hard on recognizing my assumptions, stereotypes, and unconscious bias about people from certain identity groups.

The process of social justice education involves managing the individual, interpersonal, and group dynamics that arise because students and the instructors share divergent levels of awareness, knowledge, and experience with social justice issues (Bell et al., 2016). My ability to manage the group dynamics tactfully and empathetically is important to facilitate student learning and deep reflection. My self-awareness becomes a pedagogical tool to create and maintain a learning environment that is respectful and inclusive for all students. Self-reflection becomes a critical tool for gaining awareness of my own reactions and enhancing my ability to respond to intense emotional dialogues honestly and constructively rather than avoiding them. Acknowledging my own feelings of frustration and anger at injustices perpetuated on my identity group helps me understand and be empathetic to students from other groups who react intensely to incidents of injustice. Bell et al. (2016) post several self-reflective questions for instructors to enhance their self-awareness: What individuals from which social groups do I feel most and least comfortable? Which topics do I feel most and least comfortable teaching? Where am I in my identity development that may influence how I understand and respond empathetically and sensitively to particular social identity groups and interpersonal dynamics in the classroom? By sharing with students my experiences in dealing with oppression and model self-awareness about my own identity, processes of identity development, and gaps in knowledge and understanding, I can garner more trust and respect from students.

Students at times are unaware of the stereotypes they may project onto other students and the instructor. I learn to anticipate and work with both conscious and unconscious projections that are at play in the classroom. I become more aware of how students' projections can trigger my reactions and defensiveness around my competency. On some occasions I find it challenging to manage my own feelings such as anger, guilt, or frustration. I may feel triggered by student comments or behaviors, resulting in my lack of patience to work with students empathetically. I need to be aware if I become deeply involved with my own identity or inequality, it can be more difficult for me to attend to other social identities or forms of oppression. It is important for me as an instructor to examine my own assumptions and biases and become conscious of how these biases may influence my interactions with students in harmful ways that I may not aware of. If I model willingness to acknowledge, get feedback, and reflect on my own assumptions and bias and take active steps to overcome them, I can demonstrate to students that they, too, can be open to constructive feedback.

5. Discussion

5.1 Study Outcomes and Implications for Social Justice Education

Teaching identity, microaggression, and social justice, shares several goals. Articulated in the CSWE's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2015), these goals include: engage differences and diversity in practice, and advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice. This article described five sets of reflective, experiential, and collaborative learning activities in an Identity and Social Justice course designed to achieve these goals and advance social work students' awareness and understanding of the histories of various identity groups that

have experienced discrimination, microaggression, and other forms of oppression. While more rigorous evaluation of these activities have yet to be completed, anecdotal student feedback collected in course evaluations and surveys, students' self-assessment of attainment of course competencies, and the instructor's critical reflection and self-assessment, suggest that teaching social justice and identity courses using a reflective, experiential, and collaborative pedagogical approach has a promising potential for advancing most of the goals set in the CSWE's cultural competency standards.

Students' responses and assessments by the instructor suggest that using educational tools proposed by Hackman (2005) including critical thinking, content mastery, action and social change, personal reflection, and awareness of multicultural group dynamics, can help students learn the concepts of race, racism, oppression, microaggression, power, privilege, intersectionality, and cultural humility and recognize the effects of racism, oppressions, and other forms of bigotry upon the physical and mental well-being of marginalized and vulnerable populations. It was observed that many students showed an increase of self-awareness of both privilege and personal bias and utilized self-reflection towards development of cultural competence. This reflective, experiential, and collaborative pedagogical approach shares several characteristics. It is a history- and narrative-based learning and through histories, contemporary events, and rich descriptions of various identity groups, students learn about critical issues facing marginalized and vulnerable populations. It is discussion-centered and ideas and learning flows fluidly between the instructor and students. It is a collaborative group learning process as students actively reflect, share, and discuss about their observations, personal experience and interpersonal situations, and engage in constructive and difficult dialogues with each other. Finally, materials selected for learning such as stories, narratives, metaphors, are context-specific as students see the connection of social justice education to day-to-day practice contexts.

Major findings in this study have several implications for the instructor to use this pedagogical approach to advance social justice education. First, establishing norms and guidelines for class discussion and behavior at the beginning of the course offers an important step to recognize and manage the anxiety and fears as well as the hopes and excitement that students bring to the social justice education. As students become more conscious of privilege and disadvantage, and the stereotypes or biases they hold about each other, they are reminded to maintain and act on their new levels of awareness. Differing levels of comfort zones, interpersonal skills, and learning styles among diverse student populations can create challenges for students and the instructor in a social justice learning environment. Students may hold unexamined assumptions, biases, stereotypes, misinformation, and entrenched modes of thinking. It is important that social justice instructors post contradictions skillfully and offer support for students to reflect critically their emotional and ideological attachments about their social identities and statuses, as well as privileges, power, and structural inequalities.

Second, instructors need to encourage ways of interacting that are inclusive, honest, respectful, and courageous, and support students to challenge injustice and oppressive practice in their relationships and in the institutional systems of which they are a part of. To promote the culture of inclusive learning, instructors remind students the importance of mutual respect, active listening and learning from each other, and acknowledge that every student's participation is important. Sharing one's experiences with the class is a form of experiential education. Learning activities that invite students to share their stories and experiences with privilege, disadvantage, and oppression, and examples from their lives outside of classroom make their experiences and example part of the curriculum. As they take psychological risk to gain knowledge and awareness and engage in difficult dialogues, the instructor needs to remind the class to respect each other's privacy, keep the class discussion confidential, and engage in empathetic listening.

To promote students' ongoing dialogues and critical reflection and analysis of their unique experiences, the instructor needs to respond to students' personal sharing and class dialogues sensitively, tactfully, and purposefully (Kwong, 2016). Responses from the instructors need to be reassuring, supportive and affirmative to students while they engage in self-awareness and critical reflective activities. To assist students to gain perspective about their experience and proactively take steps to achieve cultural competence, the instructor needs to provide students with guidance and suggestions to enhance their personal effectiveness. Finally, it is important that the instructor's brief lecture and presentation, experiential class activities, collaborative group presentations and discussions, critical reviews of readings, and reflections of personal and professional experiences, are seamlessly integrated and delivered to facilitate student engagement, mastery of key concepts, and acquiring course competencies. For example, students are encouraged to share their reading notes and personal insights in class activities. Critical reflection paper allows students to reflect on class activities and course readings. It is also important to connect themes from one session to another and between class activities and major written assignments.

5.2 Study Limitations

There are limitations to this project. The project relied on students' self-assessment and feedback and online course evaluations as the primary source of data and did not employ more rigorous and systematic data collection instruments. Although most students completed the surveys, the sample size was small. The survey did not collect specific demographic data such as gender, race/ethnicity or other personal characteristics of students. It was not a representative sample. The application of this pedagogy was limited to two sections of a specific course; the findings from this project cannot be generalized to the entire social work student populations. Despite these limitations, this project does contribute to our increased knowledge and understandings about the use of experiential class learning and collaborative group activities to help students critically reflect their social identities and recognize the history of various identity groups that have experienced discrimination, microaggressions, and other forms of oppressions.

5.3 Conclusion

The intent to advance social justice education for social work students inspired the instructor's decision on a range of pedagogical choices to guide what educational tools to use, what students are learning, and how they are learning. The use of this pedagogical approach provides students with learning experiences in the classroom and beyond, including experiential class activities, brief lectures, class discussion, reflection on a range of critical topics, group collaboration and role-plays, individual reading notes, and critical reflection assignments. Through these activities, students explore and develop knowledge and insights on a range of topics such as racism, oppression, microaggression, social identities, intersectionality, power, privilege, and cultural humility. Students also understand various forms of prejudice and discrimination and acquire critical skills and cultural competence that have direct application both in the classroom and in the social work field.

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